United Nations E/CN.6/2004/NGO/27

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
16 January 2004

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Forty-eighth session
1-12 March 2004
Item 3 (c) (i) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality

Statement submitted by Women's National Commission, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.6/2004/1.

04-21152 (E) 050204

The Women's National Commission (WNC) is the official independent advisory body giving views of women to the UK government. The WNC has more than 300 member organisations drawn from women's professional associations, voluntary bodies, political parties, trade unions and religious groups all over the country.

In 2000 when the themes for forthcoming years were being discussed, many felt that men had already played too great a part in the affairs of the world and that this theme had no place in the work of the Commission on the Status of Women. Others believed that only when men and boys become champions of equality and realise that equality is not a "women's issue", will real progress be achieved.

However, over time this theme has become focused on only two areas: HIV/AIDS and the workplace. We believe that equality can only be realised through the active participation of men in all areas.

Of course, men and boys need to be made increasingly aware that it is their role in sexual activity that has made HIV/AIDS a pandemic of tragic proportions. Women the world over often find themselves in vulnerable positions that make it impossible to have any real choice over sexual partners or sexual activity. Men and boys need to be educated to understand that HIV/AIDS cannot be alleviated by having sexual intercourse with a virgin – regardless of age. It is evident that in this area the role of men and boys is vital. It is imperative that they take more responsibility for their actions and participate actively in increasing safe sexual behaviour.

In the workplace, the role of men cannot be overstated, as economic independence for women has been proven to produce greater empowerment. Greater economic independence follows the education of girls. A sound education better prepares and equips girls for employment, and, rightfully instils expectations of a position with both equal status and salary. The significance of gender equality and training from early education must be emphasised, so that boys and girls progress into adult life free from sex-stereotyped attitudes that result in wasted ability, lack of economic and social well-being, and too often, a sense of female inferiority. The aim must be always to create and sustain shared responsibility and genuine equality.

Empowerment for women also improves if more women are given equal opportunity in all fields of endeavour. Their skills and unique contributions can positively contribute to any area of society in which they are involved. Their contribution should not be denied through lack of opportunity, training or support. Such denial hinders the very development of humanity as a whole. Whilst great strides have been made in many countries and in many sectors of employment, it is still the case that even in developed countries women predominate in low level and part-time work, in poorly paid sectors, and in only a limited number of areas of employment such as caring, cleaning and catering.

The role of men in empowering women, changing work patterns, ensuring secondary and tertiary education for girls, supporting women through work based training, encouraging female colleagues and providing support in child care, can make a huge difference in the work place.

Recalling the Mission Statement of the Beijing Platform for Action where it is stated, "Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace", the WNC recognises that "...women share common concerns that can be addressed only by working together and in partnership with men towards the common goal of gender equality around the world." Therefore, the role of men and boys should not only be discussed in relation to the workplace and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Rather, this partnership must be understood and developed in every aspect of society, in the areas of media, the environment, institutional mechanisms, decision-making and power and in education.

Lessons learnt from best practice such as that evidenced by the global campaign for education can be followed in other areas. Male community and faith leaders can play a vital role in leading their communities in an enhanced and more proactive part in championing equality.

Together with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention of Rights of the Child, the International Convention on Human Rights, Convention on Trans-national Crime and other international agreements, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Beijing +5 Outcome Document cite praiseworthy principles but what is needed now is the courage and conviction of states parties to realise these noble ideas and transform them into "immediate and concerted action"[1] and embedded processes, in order that they transcend words and become action.

If humanity is to progress, we can no longer ignore the fact that more than half of the world's population is female. To deny the potential contribution of the world's women to every area of activity: to science. industry, agriculture, politics, the arts and so on, is to deny humanity its future. Men cannot achieve the greatness that could be theirs if they continue to deny women their full part in all walks of life. When men and boys become the champion for equality in ***every*** area, not only will they stop preventing women and girls from having their full human rights, they will find that their own potentialities will also be revealed as they become partners in a world where all peoples, regardless of gender, participate fully and freely on the world's stage and all humankind will enjoy new vistas of prosperity and peace.

As long as men refuse the opportunities repeatedly offered to engage women in making decisions at all levels, equality and equity will not be achieved.

We therefore recommend that men are trained alongside women in gender equality; that they teach gender equality, reproductive health education, and the peaceful resolution of domestic conflict, to boys; that men and boys are educated worldwide to abandon violence against women, which is one of the key and hidden causes of women's continuing inequality; and, crucially, that men working for the UN are trained to implement the UN's commitments on gender equality, particularly Security Council Resolution 1325.

[1] Beijing Platform for Action Mission Statement paragraph 4.